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Can You Really Improve Your Emotional Intelligence?

by Tomas Chamorro-Premuzic | 12:00 PM May 29, 2013

Who wouldn't want a higher level of emotional intelligence? Studies have shown that a high emotional quotient (or EQ) boosts career success (<http://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1002/job.714/abstract>), entrepreneurial potential (http://www.drtonascop.com/uploads/EQNomics_PAID_2011.pdf), leadership talent (<http://digitalcommons.unl.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1013&context=leadershipfacpub>), health (<http://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S019188691000276X>), relationship satisfaction (<http://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0191886902002428>), humor (http://www.drtonascop.com/uploads/HierarchicalHumour_PAID_2008.pdf), and happiness (http://www.drtonascop.com/uploads/HappyPersonality_PAID_2007.pdf). It is also the best antidote to work stress and it matters in every job — because all jobs involve dealing with people, and people with higher EQ are more rewarding to deal with (<http://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/iops.12001/abstract>).

Most coaching interventions try to enhance some aspect of EQ, usually under the name of social, interpersonal, or soft skills training. The underlying reasoning is that, whereas IQ is very hard to change, EQ can increase with deliberate practice and training.

But what is the evidence? For example, if you've been told you need to keep your temper under control, show more empathy for others, or be a better listener, what are the odds you can really do it? How do you know if your efforts will pay off, and which interventions will be most effective?

Nearly 3,000 scientific articles have been published on EQ since the concept was first introduced (http://heblab.research.yale.edu/pub_pdf/pub153_SaloveyMayeriCP1990_OCR.pdf) in 1990, and there are five key points to consider:

1. Your level of EQ is firm, but not rigid. Our ability to identify and manage our own and others' emotions is fairly stable (<http://psycnet.apa.org/index.cfm?fa=buy.optionToBuy&uid=1996-03014-011>) over time, influenced by our early childhood experiences (http://books.google.co.uk/books?hl=en&lr=&id=eZMxoRs5aUkC&oi=fnd&pg=PP2&dq=attachment+longitudinal&ots=bTCCnQnJ_G&sig=WKjmYF2ZbgyYzG0qymq8SIHdB0k#v=onepage&q=attachment%20longitudinal&f=false) and even genetics ([http://www.psychometriclab.com/admins/files/Emotion \(2008\) - TEI.pdf](http://www.psychometriclab.com/admins/files/Emotion (2008) - TEI.pdf)). That does not mean we cannot change it, but, realistically, long-term improvements will require a great deal of dedication and guidance.

Everyone can change, but few people are seriously willing to try. Think about the worst boss you ever had — how long would it take him to start coming across as more considerate, sociable, calm or positive? And that's the easier part — changing one's reputation. It is even harder to change one's internal EQ; in other words, you might still feel stressed out or angry on the inside, even if you manage not to show those emotions on the outside.

The bottom line is that some people are just naturally more grumpy, shy, self-centered or insecure, while other people are blessed with natural positivity, composure, and people-skills. However, no human behavior is unchangeable. One good piece of news is that EQ tends to increase with age (http://www.6seconds.org/sei/media/WP_EQ_and_Age.pdf), even without deliberate interventions. That's the technical way to say that (most people) mature with age.

2. Good coaching programs do work. Good news for all you coaches and your clients; bad news for the skeptics. While no program can get someone from 0 to 100%, a well-designed coaching intervention can easily achieve improvements of 25%. Various meta-analyses (quantitative reviews that synthesize the findings from many published studies) suggest that the most coachable element of EQ is interpersonal skills (http://www.ispi.org/archives/resources/EffectivenessofTrainingArthur_etal.pdf) — with average short-term improvements of 50%. Think of it as teaching negotiation and social etiquette — what the great Dale Carnegie called “how to win friends and influence people.” For stress management programs (<https://activityinsight.pace.edu/krichardson/intellcont/Richardson JOHP 2008-1.pdf>), the average improvement reported is around 35%. Even empathy can be trained in adults. The most compelling demonstration comes from neuropsychological studies highlighting the “plasticity (<http://www.cbs.mpg.de/depts/singer/arb3>)” of the social brain. These studies suggest that, with adequate training, people can become more pro-social, altruistic, and compassionate.

And there's a bonus: research (<http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/21443316>) also shows that the benefits of EQ-coaching are not just confined to the workplace — they produce higher levels of happiness, mental and physical health, improved social and marital relationships, and decrease levels of cortisol (the stress hormone). Admittedly, the programs studied here may be considerably more sophisticated than the more intuitive and eclectic approach of the average coach, but the point is that EQ can be enhanced with the right program. (And so if your approach isn't working, maybe it's time to look for a better one.)

3) But you can only improve if you get accurate feedback. While many ingredients are required for a good coaching program, the most important aspect of effective EQ-coaching is giving people accurate feedback. Most of us are generally unaware of how others see us — and this especially true for managers. As noted ([https://winona.ims.mnscu.edu/pages/personal/653619/Executive Coaching \(Joo, 2005 HRDR\).pdf](https://winona.ims.mnscu.edu/pages/personal/653619/Executive Coaching (Joo, 2005 HRDR).pdf)), “it is remarkable how many smart, highly motivated, and apparently responsible people rarely pause to contemplate their own behaviors.”

A recent meta-analysis (<http://digitalcommons.unl.edu/leadershipfacpub/14/>) shows that the relationship between self- and other-ratings of EQ is weak (weaker, even, than for IQ (<http://psycnet.apa.org/journals/apl/67/3/280/>)). In other words, we may not have a very accurate idea of how smart we are, but our notion of how nice we are is even less accurate. The main reason for this blind spot is wishful thinking or overconfidence: it is a well-documented (but rarely discussed) fact that, in any domain of competence, most people think they are better (<http://psycnet.apa.org/index.cfm?fa=search.displayRecord&UID=2005-14648-005>) than they actually are. Thus any intervention focused on increasing EQ must begin by helping people understand what their real strengths and weaknesses are.

Although fewer than 15% organizations evaluate the effectiveness of their coaching initiatives, there is strong evidence that using reliable and valid assessment methods, such as personality tests or 360-degree feedback (http://www.thecoaches.com/docs/pdfs/coactive_coaching_theory.pdf), produces the best outcomes. For example, a controlled experimental study of 1,361 global corporation managers showed that feedback-based coaching increased managers' propensity to seek advice and improved their performance (as judged by their direct reports) one year later.

4) Some techniques (and coaches) are more competent than others. Although there is little research on the personal characteristics of effective coaches, there is some research on the methods that work the best. Clearly, some interventions to enhance EQ are more effective than others. The most effective coaching techniques (<https://activityinsight.pace.edu/krichardson/intellcont/Richardson JOHP 2008-1.pdf>) fall under the realm of cognitive-behavioral therapy (<http://johnjayresearch.org/cje/files/2012/08/Empirical-Status-of-CBT.pdf>). Attempts to enhance psychological flexibility (<http://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0005789411000888>) — the ability to accept and deal with (as opposed to avoid) unpleasant situations — are also effective. The most popular (not necessarily the most effective) methods are relaxation and meditation. Contrary to popular belief, interventions designed to enhance self-esteem or confidence are rarely effective and often counterproductive (<http://www.csom.umn.edu/assets/71496.pdf>). But coaching is not pure science; it is also an art. As such, its success depends on the talent of the coach.

5) Some people are more coachable than others. Even the best coach and coaching methods will fail with certain clients (just imagine trying to coach Silvio Berlusconi). This is hardly surprising given that many coaching engagements are arranged by HR for, shall we say, unenthusiastic clients. There is an old joke about how many psychologists it takes to change a light bulb. Just one — so long as the light bulb *wants* to change. On the one hand, EQ may enhance coachability — clients with better people skills, more empathy, and greater self-awareness are better equipped to improve. On the other hand, if you are sensitive to criticism, insecure, and worry about failure (all characteristics of people with a lower EQ) you should be more willing to change. Although there is not much research on coachability, a recent study (<http://www.scribd.com/doc/81380157/Behind-the-Executive-Door-Unexpected-Lessons-for-Managing-Your-Boss-and-Career>) showed that evaluating clients' coachability levels at the start of the sessions can increase the effectiveness of coaching.

Many employee engagement surveys, such as Gallup's and Sirota's, have shown that managers are the major cause of employee disengagement and stress, and disengagement and stress have been shown to be major inhibitors of productivity and retention. In line, the American Institute of Stress reports that stress is the main cause underlying 40% of workplace turnovers and 80% of work-related injuries. Although EQ-coaching will not solve these problems, it may alleviate the symptoms for both managers and employees. So, with or without a coach, working on your EQ does pay off.